

**Because  
The Boss  
Belongs to Us**

**Queer Femmes on Bruce Springsteen**

## How we got here


I was living in Columbus, Ohio when I first heard *Nebraska*, copied onto one side of a cassette from my friend Robert. Don't think I'd have found my way to it without him, because why would I have listened to the Bruce Springsteen of *Born in the U.S.A.*? To someone singing songs about New Jersey, where I'd never been and didn't care to go? I'd never listened to the lyrics too closely, and those big flag stripes on the album cover didn't signal anything promising. But my tape was encased in a hand-drawn cover (Robert's sharpie-rendered copy of the original album art), and the mixtapes he sent my way always included at least one sonic-world-altering song. So I gave it a shot. It was a midwestern triangulation: this thing named after a state I'd never visited, sent from my old stomping grounds (Springfield, Missouri) to my new place in Columbus. I listened, set it aside for a long time – a good 10 years of aside – and felt a little guilty that I didn't love it as much as I imagined I was supposed to, as much as Robert did.

I only circled back years later, when I met Emily (the same Emily whose words appear here), and discovered her love of Bruce, and then Maggie (ditto), and I wondered what I'd been missing, what I hadn't discovered that made them love him so. I went back and listened, and sure enough, Bruce claimed me, and I claimed him, and here we are. So far away (in time & space) from the place Robert & I

18 were from. I don't want to erase the distinct differences between my experiences and the songs' accounts, but oh boy, I listen, and wind up back in places I know, places I've left. Somehow these songs allow me to go back, at what feels like a safe remove. But that's my history, my set of feelings & responses to just one album.

I wanted to do this zine because I was surprised to learn how many of my femme friends had some sort of *thing* for Bruce. I was curious about our love for this straight white dude. I wanted to know more about the relationships we'd established between our queerness & Bruce & his music; I hoped that by exploring these affinities we could trace the complicated workings of identification and desire in our everyday lives, at least around this one object. Reading through the contents of this zine, I'd say we did just that. I'm lucky to have found such amazing collaborators.

I'd love to read your Bruce stories, too. If you want to get in touch, email me: [alana.kumbier@gmail.com](mailto:alana.kumbier@gmail.com), or write: 74 Park St., Apt. 2. Somerville, MA 02143.

19  *Alana*  
March 2011

Special thanks to David Taber for the cover photograph & for his encouragement & nonstop enthusiasm for this project (despite thinking that Bruce Springsteen might just be a bit overrated). Love & xoxoxowow!

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# REAL BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN



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THEY BRING YOU UP TO DO

WHAT YOUR DADDY DONE

CHRISTINE BYLUND

One of my first memories is my father's hand across my eyes. The musky warmth and the itchiness of his dry skin against my forehead. He used to smell of sweat and deep green forests, manual labor. He was the first man I ever knew. And his hands were safety. I used to ask him to put his huge rugged hand over my scared eyes, as green as the forest where he spent almost all of his time. When I was scared when watching TV his hands would shelter me, and I would lean into a well worn flannel shirt and inhale the smells of pine trees and hard work.

I was born three months prematurely as one of two twins, a daughter of a couple who had never thought of children yet it happened. I was the daughter of Pentecostal rural blue-collar men and women and I forced my way out on the 4th of July. In Sweden that day is nothing special, although we all know it's the Independence Day and across the ocean a country

x 4087

celebrates its freedom.

It was a magical date; not only because it was my birthday, and proof that I and my brother had made it out, at least partly well. It was something bigger than that. It formed a bond between me and a magical mystery country - America.

4-8

I didn't know much about it all, but father played Pete Seeger LPs and my mother told stories of mad Pentecostal family memories. I drank red fruit squash amongst giggling aunts and in between meetings with the workers union my father would shelter my eyes from all that scared me on TV. Trolls, angry men and roaring dragons. I carried the mark of an outsider not only because I was a crip-girl, not only because my family was an odd mix of politics and religion, but for my first and strongest passion. The English language.

Although I wasn't sure if I would fit. For years and years all I ever saw from the land on which day of Independence I was born was excess, greasy food and odd politicians. I grew up to fall in love with freaks, queers, manly women and effeminate men. Rural matriarchy who'd clad and fed me didn't disapprove of me, but around me another rural cage grew.

5

Questioning me about when I would get a boyfriend and

x 4298

who it would be.

So I moved. I am still on the move - I am no longer rural but urban. I am making an academic persona around myself. And they question me here too, they ask about my past, they assume we were dumb, and that religion meant oppression. They couldn't be more wrong.

Sometimes I feel wrong, even though it's more than okay for me to date whoever I want here. I long for rural simplicity, for no fake veneers and no assumption of what a blue-collar upbringing is or isn't.

My father's Pete Seeger records were a first clue to another kind of America, to John Henry who fought the steam-drill and died with a hammer in his hand. To his wife Polly Anne who hammers on still. I used to sit with my legs crossed on the living room floor and listen to them in huge white plastic headphones. They were as much of a home that my history and this new throbbing passion for an exotic language could ever be.

Years from that I sit with my girl in the madly uncomfortable leather couch in our co-op. We smell of sweat and hard labor on stage, and we drink red

wine a lot. She plays music on her mp3-player with my speakers. It's a fair share. And a raspy smoky voice roars

*John Henry was a little baby, sittin' on his daddy's knee...*

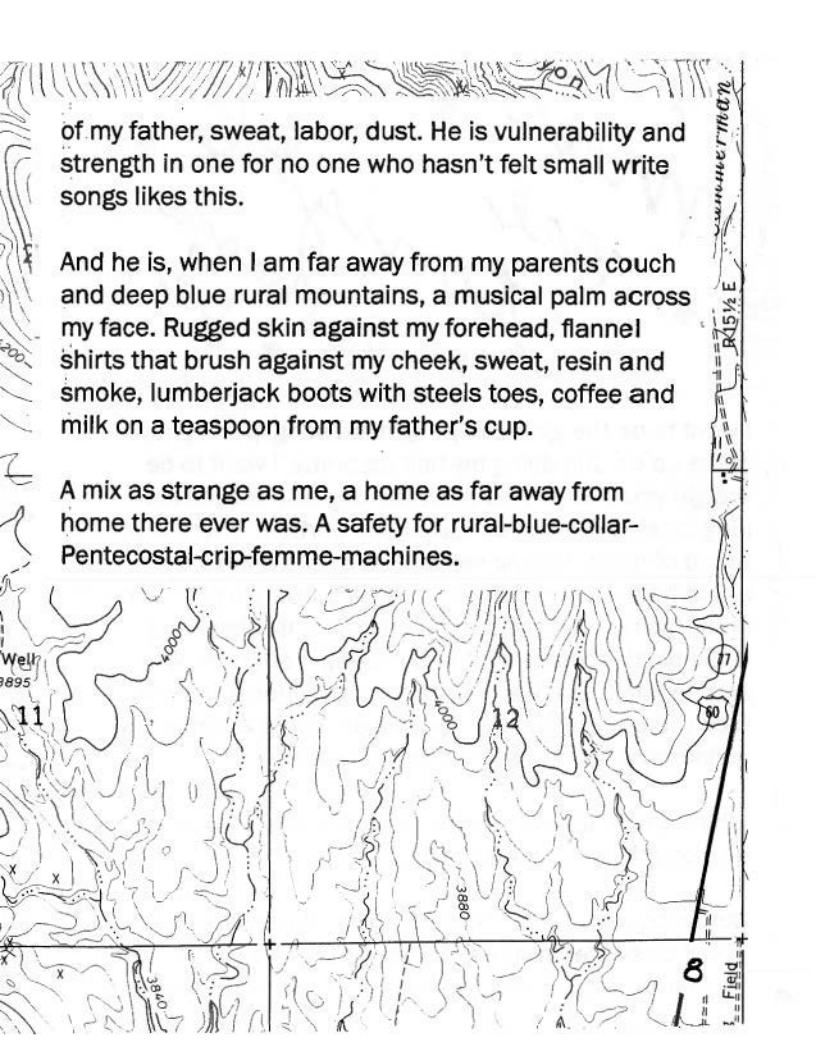
- It's Bruce, she says. Bruce Springsteen he sings these songs by this guy, I don't know....

- Seeger, I reply triumphantly. Pete Seeger. I know, my daddy used to play his records.

Bruce comes in just the right moment. I am investigating a new sense of masculinity and power, one well hidden underneath fitted pencil skirts and firmly buttoned up blouses. I thrust myself into an upbringing filled with stigma but free from shame. Throughout history we have always been the freaks; poor, religious, socialist, story tellers. My colleagues ask me if my mother is a teacher, because it's too hard for them to imagine that blue-collar mothers speak about literature with their daughters, and I cringe.

Bruce has been my refuge. Those rugged black jeans and open shirts have been my idea of a well kept butchness inside of me, only brought out for those who really deserve to see it. He has been the American idea





of my father, sweat, labor, dust. He is vulnerability and strength in one for no one who hasn't felt small write songs likes this.

And he is, when I am far away from my parents couch and deep blue rural mountains, a musical palm across my face. Rugged skin against my forehead, flannel shirts that brush against my cheek, sweat, resin and smoke, lumberjack boots with steels toes, coffee and milk on a teaspoon from my father's cup.

A mix as strange as me, a home as far away from home there ever was. A safety for rural-blue-collar-Pentecostal-crip-femme-machines.

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6037A  
\* meet me tonight \*  
\* by maddie cee \*

I want to be the girl in a Springsteen song, putting my make up on and doing my hair up pretty. I want to be the girl you'll do anything for, the one who makes the long lonely drive across state lines worth it. There is a brand of queer femme sexuality that has always been about how we evoke desire in others, how we get turned on by facing the gaze that is turned on us, absorbing it like black absorbs light and making it our own. We inspire adulation. We may be tops or bottoms, we may fuck you back very nicely, but we are going to come first, goddamn it, as many times as we want.

I think Bruce always lets the woman come first. How else could he prove it all night?

9 But I also want to be the adventurer. Maybe we'll bust out of class, get away from those fools, and I'll drive my own motorcycle, thank you very much. Maybe there's a

way to drive and wrap my legs round these velvet rims  
and strap my hands cross your engines.

The art of queers has always involved satire and co-  
option of straight culture. If I'd been a queer culture  
jammer when *Born in the USA* went platinum, maybe  
I would have seen that flag backdrop as red-blooded  
american boosterism. Instead, for a queer white  
woman of my age, embracing the Boss and claiming  
him feels both natural and subversive.

I was introduced to Bruce the writer, the restless  
inquisitor of american culture, the runaway. I was  
introduced to the secret subtext, the quiet desperation,  
the longing to get out that festers in queers and small-  
town kids everywhere.

I was led to Bruce by my quiet, gentle father, who as a  
child, loved to stand on the boardwalks of Nantasket  
and let live music from the seaside dives wash over  
him. He told me once that he wanted to do something,  
anything, the way Bruce did music.

In 2005 I was working fifteen hour days at a gay-for-  
pay in the midst of the marriage equality melee in  
Massachusetts. Dad sent me this email on the 30th  
anniversary of *Born to Run*.

## **Subject: A Change was made uptown**

And the big man joined the band.  
From the coastline to the city  
All the little pretties raised their hands.

Today is the 30th Anniversary of the release of "Born to Run"

I was (my middle sister)'s age when I first heard it, the world seemed wide open.

My sister was 21 at the time. Then he followed up:

I was thinking about what I wrote about the world being wide open, I should have continued, I didn't mean to infer that I had regrets ...

I never had any idea that life could be so filled with the wonder and beauty of a family like ours.

## **the world wide open.**

In a way, I am living a piece of my father's dream. When I take my crew of queers on the road to perform in crowded bars in run-down neighborhoods, the world

does feel wide open.

A great-grandchild of Irish immigrants and dirt-poor New England farmers, I am the twisted, queer, unexpected and grateful product of their dreams for their children and their children's dreams for me.

I was eight years old and running with a dime in my hand

Into the bus stop to pick up a paper for my old man  
I'd sit on his lap in that big old Buick and steer as we  
drove through town

He'd tousle my hair and say son take a good look  
around this is your hometown

Springsteen's protagonists inherit poverty, broken promises and shuttered factories on the edge of town. From his distant, alcoholic father, my father inherited silence, stoicism, and anxiety.

As a teenager, my hobbies included all the classics for a young queer: witchcraft, folk music, vegetarianism, activism, and annoying my parents. But music was something we could talk about as Dad drove me from school to ballet classes and back.

During the Magic tour, he gets last-minute tickets for a

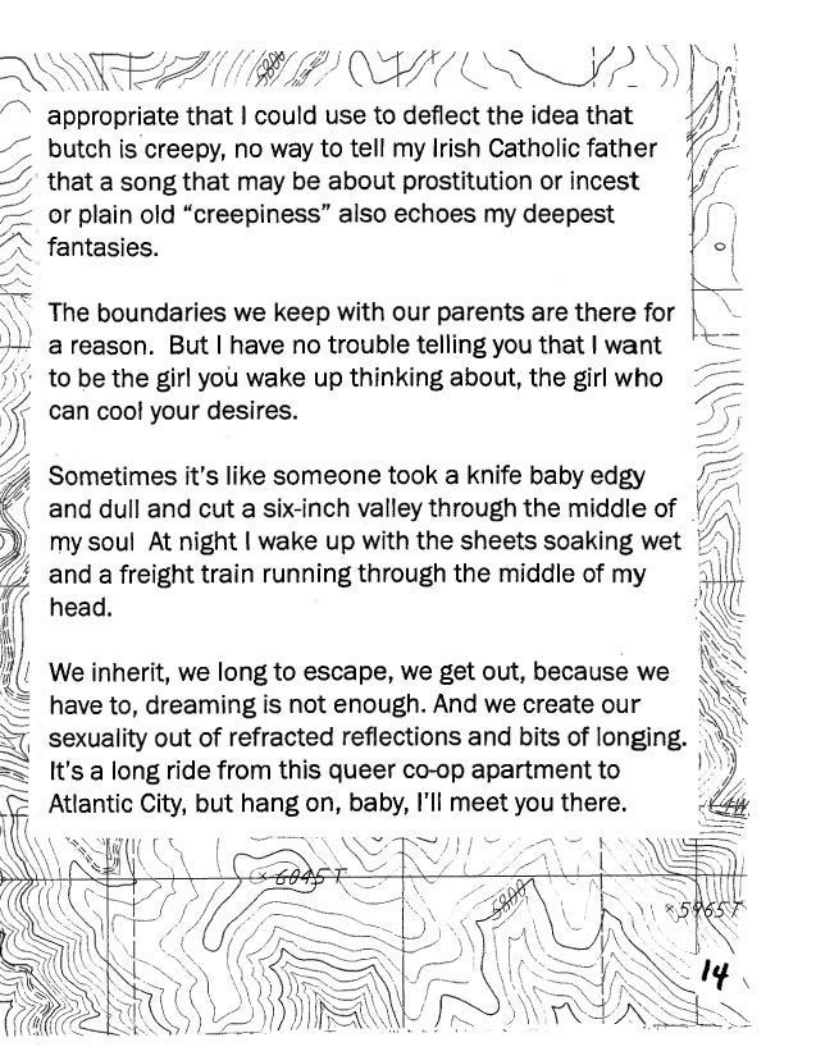
show at the Garden. We meet at some awful sports bar across from North Station, me, Dad, and the guy with tickets, who is also named Mike. I never have to sit in my nosebleed seat because Dad, who somehow in this loud arena is charming and confident, finds an empty seat near his on the bottom tier.

The bar is packed and playing nonstop Springsteen. The men look like rougher, hipper versions of Dad, but the women, with their highlights and shiny lace camis under leather jackets, look nothing like my mother, who favors polar fleece and cotton. It is the whitest, straightest crowd I've been part of in a long time.

*Tell me, little girl, is your daddy home, did he go and leave you all alone? Tell me, baby, is he good to you, can he do to you the things that I do?* the speaker's blare.

Stumbling for conversation, I mention that my roommate has a recording of a lesbian punk band covering "I'm On Fire." And that's when it happens, the one and only time my father has uttered the word "butch" in my presence. "That's a creepy song. And it would be even creepier in a butch version."

I have no way to respond, no language that is remotely



appropriate that I could use to deflect the idea that butch is creepy, no way to tell my Irish Catholic father that a song that may be about prostitution or incest or plain old "creepiness" also echoes my deepest fantasies.

The boundaries we keep with our parents are there for a reason. But I have no trouble telling you that I want to be the girl you wake up thinking about, the girl who can cool your desires.

Sometimes it's like someone took a knife baby edge and dull and cut a six-inch valley through the middle of my soul. At night I wake up with the sheets soaking wet and a freight train running through the middle of my head.

We inherit, we long to escape, we get out, because we have to, dreaming is not enough. And we create our sexuality out of refracted reflections and bits of longing. It's a long ride from this queer co-op apartment to Atlantic City, but hang on, baby, I'll meet you there.

kn I fell in love with JRG at the same time that I started  
 lar reading feminist theory. I'd always been a good student—  
 be straight A's, AP credits up the wazoo. Top Girl from  
 gei my state upon graduation. But it wasn't until I started  
 cul reading theory that I figured out there was stuff worth  
 at: alive for the first time—I'd found it. I remember reading  
 uni sections of Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*  
 fen while jacking off in my dorm room on 116th Street—  
 nat theory in the flesh indeed. JRG was doing the same  
 opJ thing, and boy, did I ever want to sit on her lap while she  
 and read me her paper on something quite poststructural.  
 me I went home for winter break, entirely unsatisfied, and  
 cor stayed up late one night, getting high and making her a  
 ger mix tape (yes, we still made mix tapes back then). The  
 ger first song? Bruce's "I'm Going Down." Because Bruce  
 not has a way of capturing exactly how it feels. And that  
 the song was exactly how I felt about her. At that point, I  
 nea thought I'd be going down, but it turned out I was going  
 in f down. Heart. Break. That's the thing about that song—  
 the and so many of Bruce's. They're just so pomo, words  
 doe doing stuff, sometimes the exact opposite things at the  
 bet exact same time, the feel of the song so often undone  
 pub by some other meaning, depending on who is listening  
 birt where and when and why. I'm Going Down.  
 with  
 tati

- Kate Drabinski

€ 15 ialism of sexual object-choice is far less easy to maintain, far more  
 v. ly incoherent, more visibly stressed and challenged at every point in



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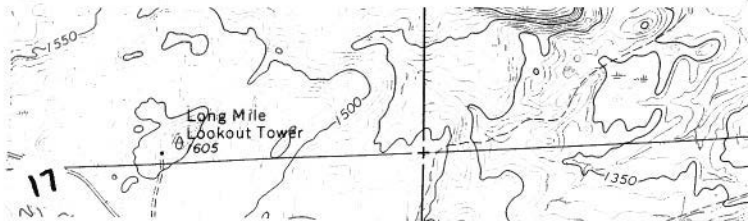
**If I could be anything in the world, I would be Bruce Springsteen's car. Listen to him in the opening stanza of "Open All Night": I had the carburetor cleaned and checked/with her line blown out she's hummin' like a turbojet/Propped her up in the backyard on concrete blocks for a new clutch plate and a new set of shocks/Took her down to the carwash, check the plugs and points/I'm goin' out tonight I'm gonna rock that joint. Oh how I'd love to be up on his concrete blocks.**

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I never really learned how to drive, but I'm a terrific passenger; after spelling things correctly, being driven around is probably what I'm best at. In 17 years in New York, a city where nobody has a car, all of my significant relationships have been with drivers. When I met her in 2002, E. had a hot little black Toyota Supra, standard transmission, watching her downshift turned me inside out. About eight months in, we acknowledged that neither of us could do anything but each other, I quit my job, we both sold everything, packed our lives into that Supra and took I-40 across to California. From Nashville, Oklahoma City, Flagstaff, Needles, she drove me wild. It took me five years to extricate myself from that particular front seat, and I don't regret the ride. I know I'd probably take more trips if I was a switch, liked to take the wheel. But I don't mind waiting out my stretches of metaphorical dark highway, my private New Jersey Turnpikes. Springsteen's plenty of company on my radio, hey ho rock n roll deliver me from nowhere.

- Emily Drabinski



The background of the page is a detailed topographic map with contour lines, some of which are labeled with numbers like 2, 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240, 250, 260, 270, 280, 290, 300, 310, 320, 330, 340, 350, 360, 370, 380, 390, 400, 410, 420, 430, 440, 450, 460, 470, 480, 490, 500, 510, 520, 530, 540, 550, 560, 570, 580, 590, 600, 610, 620, 630, 640, 650, 660, 670, 680, 690, 700, 710, 720, 730, 740, 750, 760, 770, 780, 790, 800, 810, 820, 830, 840, 850, 860, 870, 880, 890, 900, 910, 920, 930, 940, 950, 960, 970, 980, 990, 1000. The map is oriented with North at the top.

# *my* **NEBRASKA**

*heroines*


*some notes by Leslie Freeman*

I grew up hard, hardscrabble: half-Irish, half Hoosier, from the wrong side of tracks my granddad built. My face and hands: scarred deep, twisted by abuse and accident. Prettiness belonged to privilege, anyway. Freeman women worked, prayed, loved fatalistically—but always with some hope of salvation at the bitter end.

You know that Springsteen lyric, “Deliver me from nowhere?”

What I learned was all we had: sexiness, the sex work in every thing. Our economy.

Aunt Rose, Daddy's twin, knew the secret to loving someone who couldn't help but do you wrong. I never found it out—too busy following the youngest sister, Aunt Pat, I guess—but I took note of Rose's small, quiet smile.

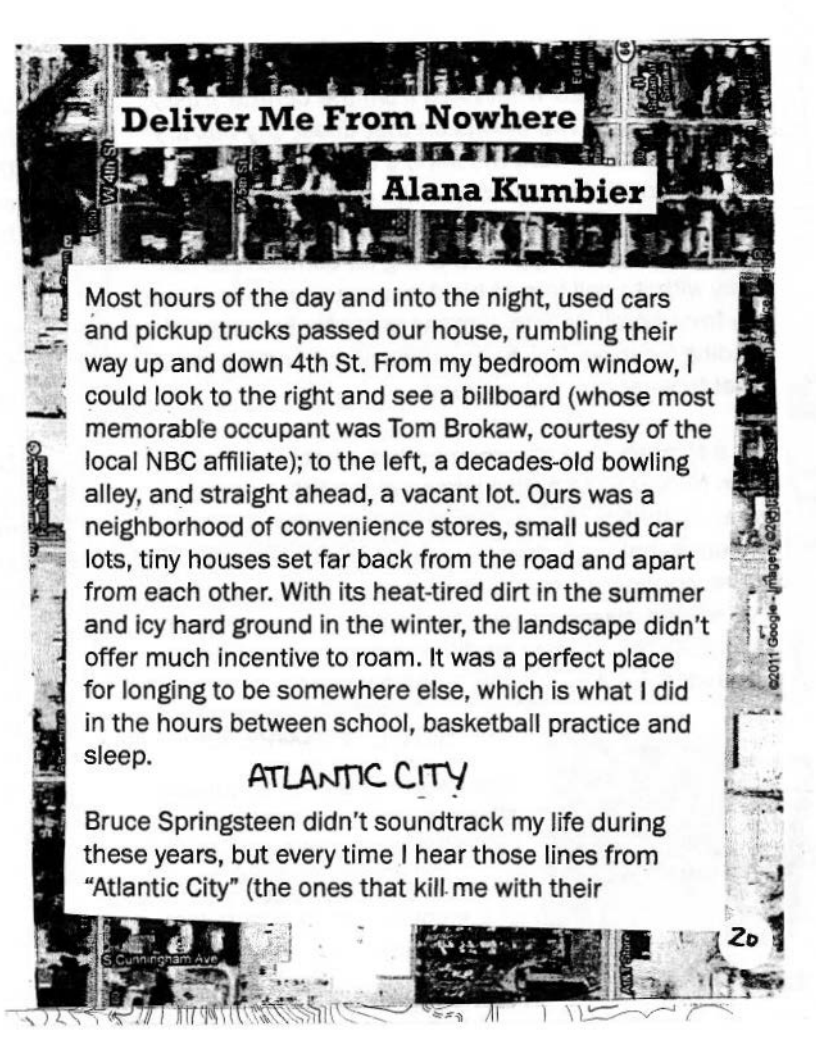


Pat shimmered: feathered hair, frosted lips. Teetering on swollen feet in tight espadrilles, she'd dance to any tune, anyplace. Pat was the one who either couldn't keep a man, or didn't want to. She loved crosswords, drank PBR with a straw. I stared with the men, at her working that straw with her pink tongue.

The girl cousins, Rose and Pat's daughters and Uncle Jim's, were already brittle teens, mean and wild-eyed. Their names for me: Monster, Little Dog, Fucking Joke. They made a game of losing me when I tagged along. But then again, they scared off neighborhood bullies, pinched the boys, who called me worse names. Leslie, sixteen to my twelve, let me practice kissing with her. When I left home—"got out", we used to say—I took Leslie's name.

Oh, the power of naming: Mama. Mama, most of all.

It's been 15 years. Mama looks me up and down, lingers over my square stance in platform boots, my anxious fists. She meets my hard gaze and shakes her head with that hard lipstick smile. I watch her see: how I'm sharp, jagged, hot only on the outside. How I offer myself for fucking. But my face, hands, wherever I carry tenderness—

An aerial photograph of a city street grid, likely in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The image is oriented horizontally but the text is placed vertically. A white rectangular box contains the title "Deliver Me From Nowhere". Another white rectangular box below it contains the author's name "Alana Kumbier". The background shows a dense grid of streets and buildings. Labels for "W 4th St" and "W 5th St" are visible on the left side of the image. A copyright notice "©2011 Google - Imagery ©2011 Earthstar" is visible on the right side.

## **Deliver Me From Nowhere**

**Alana Kumbier**

Most hours of the day and into the night, used cars and pickup trucks passed our house, rumbling their way up and down 4th St. From my bedroom window, I could look to the right and see a billboard (whose most memorable occupant was Tom Brokaw, courtesy of the local NBC affiliate); to the left, a decades-old bowling alley, and straight ahead, a vacant lot. Ours was a neighborhood of convenience stores, small used car lots, tiny houses set far back from the road and apart from each other. With its heat-tired dirt in the summer and icy hard ground in the winter, the landscape didn't offer much incentive to roam. It was a perfect place for longing to be somewhere else, which is what I did in the hours between school, basketball practice and sleep.

### **ATLANTIC CITY**

Bruce Springsteen didn't soundtrack my life during these years, but every time I hear those lines from "Atlantic City" (the ones that kill me with their

tenderness: *I drew what I had from the Central Trust /  
And I bought us two tickets on that Coast City bus ... /  
We're goin' out where the sand's turnin' to gold so put  
on your stockin's baby 'cause the night's getting cold*) I  
wind up there: my bedroom on 4th St. in 1992, waiting  
for something to happen, wishing for someone to run  
away with, to call late at night and whisper me out onto  
the front porch, to interrupt the everyday business of  
fending for myself, to be the boss of me and tell me  
what to wear for the long road.

It's a strange kind of remembering, attaching songs  
from *Nebraska* to a time when I didn't listen to them,  
when Springsteen wasn't even on my radar. It's a kind  
of sense-making, adding a layer to what's already  
there, connecting that past with my present (now that  
I've settled elsewhere, left that place & time behind).  
*Nebraska* feels like something to lean into, press up  
against, solid & real, truth in the details.

## STATE TROOPER

Joplin's in the part of southwest  
Missouri where the state meets  
up with Kansas, Arkansas, and  
Oklahoma. It's one of those parts  
of the country most drivers just  
pass through, where truckers



stop to get something to eat along I-44. When Bruce sings about late night drives through places he doesn't want to stop, where the radio's all he has for company, and still leaves him wanting more (*In the wee wee hours your mind gets hazy, radio relay towers lead me to my baby / Radio's jammed up with talk show stations / It's just talk, talk, talk, talk, till you lose your patience*), I think of Joplin. It's a place on the dial where the evangelists hold sway, where speculations about the end times are broadcast over the speakers at the DMV, making the wait in line seem even more pointless.

These broadcasts make the stakes of living in the Ozarks clear. Their messages are reinforced by billboards that populate I-44, warning about the dangers of pornography, abortion, and homosexuality. For everyone trying to save you, there's something pulling you over to the other side: adult video emporiums, drive-through liquor stores, and truck stops, open late into the night.

All this makes me wonder how I ever thought it was safe to be queer in this part of the country, how lucky that the worst that ever happened was my dorm-roommate praying over me, reading selected bible verses for our collective benefit, telling me she could

tolerate the sinner but not the sin. Promise, threat, promise, threat.


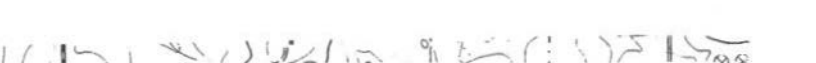
## REASON TO BELIEVE

*Seen a man standin' over a dead dog lyin' by the highway in a ditch / He's lookin' down kinda puzzled pokin' that dog with a stick / Got his car door flung open he's standin' out on highway 31 / Like if he stood there long enough that dog'd get up and run*

Part of what I love about *Nebraska* is the way its people wrestle with sticking it out or running away, how Bruce recognizes that people in similar situations make different choices, and respects them on their own terms.

It's hard to understand, when you're not from there, why you'd choose to stick around. I've come to love the drive-in fast food joints, the Waffle House, biscuits and gravy, laundromat pinball machines with 25-cent games, and the hawks circling the fields along Route 279, between Joplin and Bentonville. But that's not enough. I left, again and again. Ran away with a scholarship to a boarding school in the east, came back for college. Left again for grad school. Spent years in the space between living and belonging, coming into my own by disidentifying with the place. The characters in Bruce's songs who make good on plans to get out of town, head for a coast, may not






be queer. But they're making a distinctly queer move, migrating elsewhere in search of a better life. While I've been gone, the rest of my family have steadily grown roots in southwest Missouri. My younger brothers chose not to go away for school – to not go to college at all – and to marry women who grew up in the area. This is the part that's hardest for me to understand: the desire to stay, in this particular place. To imagine it's going to yield something more than it already has: better jobs, new opportunities. Sticking around long enough to earn the status of From Here. They're raising children who may also want to stay, who won't experience the shifts we did growing up, moving across the midwest. Not getting, perhaps, the sense of freedom and possibility those disruptions can ~~make~~ engender.

My brothers work labor- and energy-intensive jobs with long hours. They've had work pulled out from under them, they've gone without health insurance. They're present and good to their partners and kids, and don't get to take vacations. And they do all of this without complaint.

## OPEN ALL NIGHT

I've never had that experience Bruce sings about in "Open All Night": being a lady riding in the front seat of



a beloved, much-worked-on car, being driven around by a hot date (or, even better, sitting on their lap, eating fried chicken, checking the map). Didn't think I could write much about that, because it hasn't been part of my romantic history. But if we remove the date and put my brother Dave in the front seat, and switch from car-as-sex-machine to vehicle-as-site-for-sibling-bonding, I'm there.

Dave and I have a history in his Jeep, his old Ford, his shiny white pickup truck: we packed up the Jeep, futon parts precariously strapped to the frame, when I moved from Columbus to New Orleans; drove through Christmas Day ice storms in the Ford; and made many less eventful trips between family homes in Joplin, Columbus, Detroit/Ann Arbor, and Windsor, Ontario.

This summer, we drove from Detroit to Caseville, Michigan to visit family on Lake Huron. We made the drive with slow-downs and stops along the way: the family farm, sold to new owners at least a decade ago; the Pioneer Sugar beet processing plant (where a few generations of family had worked); the lakeside towns gearing up for the Fourth of July tourists, promising fireworks and fish fries, beer kegs and patio cookouts. We didn't talk much about what we were seeing. I didn't think about Nebraska. That happened months later,

when Dave was driving me around again, this time on Route 279 between Joplin & the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport in Fayetteville.

We'd been listening to country music all weekend, every time we were in his Jeep or his truck, and out dancing at Guitars Rock N Country Bar with his girlfriend & our sister-in-law. I liked the way these songs were full of images, so I could really get a picture in my mind, think about how the singer might move through their world (which often seemed pretty damn close to the one we were driving through). There are more romantic sentiments than "I'd like to check you for ticks," but as Dave & I were triple-stepping around the dance floor, it seemed like a pretty sweet offer. And it made me think about Bruce's songs, and all of the characters & images & unexpected sweetnesss that animate them.

Back in the Jeep, I asked Dave about what we'd been listening to. Turns out he loves the images and stories, too. He told me about a song Miranda Lambert sings about visiting an old house, and having memories about each of the rooms, and how that made him remember houses we lived in. We talked about our grandfather's mountain house, where we spent days rambling around in the forest and swimming, and nights peering out the small window at the base of the

14 staircase, watching racoons eat (& sometimes squabble over) our dinner scraps.

We talked about the Jeep we rode to get up the steep hill to the house, on the dirt & gravel roads. Discovered we both experience the smell of diesel-powered engines as memory triggers: of riding up the steep hill to the house, of raccoon tracks on the Jeep's seats and hood, of trips into town for ice cream & sodas.

And it struck me, this Jeep Dave & I ride in now, these trips we take as adults, they're creating their own memories, too. Not raccoons and ice cream, but hawks and drive-throughs, country songs and family stories.

We share an intimacy enabled by the Jeep & on the road, traveling in the space between where he's settled and where I've ended up. This is the part of my history feels closest to a Bruce Springsteen song. Listening to *Nebraska* helps me understand my relationship to the places I've left, to my brothers who don't: I never had a sweetheart who took me away, bought me a ticket on that Coast City bus, but I do have a brother who understands why I go, who meets me at the airport and brings me back to the places we claim as home, who gives me a reason to visit, and helps me understand why a person might stay.



# BLOWING THE DOORS OFF A CLOSET

BY MILO MILLER

I will freely admit that I'm not much of a Bruce Springsteen fan. His music is alright, but I've never been that ~~draw~~ <sup>drawn</sup> to it. I think a large part of the reason is that I was in elementary school in the early 1980s. My recollection is that all the other boys in my class - the popular, jock-y, "cool" boys were into him, Van Halen, David Lee Roth, and other members of the masculine side of the 94 WKTl pop spectrum. I, on the other hand, hanging out mostly with other 3rd and 4th grade girls (and other dorky, non-popular, non-jock-y boys) was listening to Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, Billy Joel, and Weird Al Yankovic. To this day, they're seemingly worlds apart, musically. Also, the Madonna should have been a sign of who I was on the spectrum of absolute masculinity... but I digress...

Post-Elementary school I turned to poppy 1960's surf music, with a large love for Jan & Dean and The Beach Boys. That led to The Beatles (the first song of which I

actually recognized as a Beatles song was Here Comes The Sun.) All of that changed on my 13th birthday. That year I was given "Globe of Frogs" by Robyn Hitchcock and the Egyptians and "Strangeways Here We Come" by The Smiths. From there there was no turning back. While I continued my love of the Beatles (probably because I was queer for John) and other 1960's folk/folk-rock bands and musicians, I declared that my one true love was The Smiths and Morrissey.

This mad passion for Moz and The Smiths led me down the obviously queer path of Alternative music (as it was then called) with deviations into Depeche Mode, New Order, The Violent Femmes (my hometown heros!), The Eurythmics, early Nine Inch Nails, Ministry, R.E.M., U2, Tori Amos, and so much more. By the time I came out to everyone as bisexual in 1992 I had a rather large collection of cassettes and a growing one of CDs that clearly marked me as a femme-y queer boy.

As I was at the point of embracing that, merrily did I prance off to university in the fall of 1993 where my musical horizons were expanded to include New Wave, 70's and 80's pop and disco, some techno (before it got broken down into subcategories of House, Drum-n-Bass, Happy Hardcore, etc.), some hip-hop and more. At the time the music I listened to and used as signifiers

remained pretty queer. It allowed me to be a boy who loved other boys and girls with no sticky questions of gender or orientation. I was able to avoid "macho" by cranking up Erasure, swiping on some eyeliner, and re-dying my hair fuscias.

That was about to change, though it was a slow process. The catalyst, however, is directly related to Bruce Springsteen. In the summer of 1996 (I think) I went to spend a long weekend with one of my best friends from high school in Madison, WI. Barry was an entertainment columnist for *The Daily Cardinal*, a die-hard R.E.M. fanatic, and all around lover of music. Though it's slightly fuzzy in my mind, I seem to remember that we had gone out to a mixed (queer/straight) club, had come home late, and crashed.

Being an early riser, I was up way before he and his girlfriend were, and after making some coffee I went looking for something to read. On the sun dappled shelf I came across a book of essays by the late Lester Bangs. Bangs was a columnist and music critic for Creem, Rolling Stone and other magazines from 1969 until his death in 1982. (He's played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman in Cameron Crowe's film *Almost Famous*.) At any rate, there I was, sprawled on Barry's futon, about to take a plunge.

Because Bangs wrote about music, his essays and critiques were all over the place. The one that stuck with me was his review of Springsteen's 1975 album *Born To Run*. In it, Bangs essentially calls Springsteen a punk (with all the power that connotes from a mid-70s perspective) and make comparisons and references to The Velvet Underground, Roxy Music, Bob Dylan, and John Coltrane, among others. Of course these were bands and musicians that I knew and liked to some degree or another, and that I recognized as being "my" kind of music. Thanks to the miracle of the internet, the essay can be found here: <http://beatpatrol.wordpress.com/2009/02/05/bruce-springsteen-born-to-run-1975-2/>

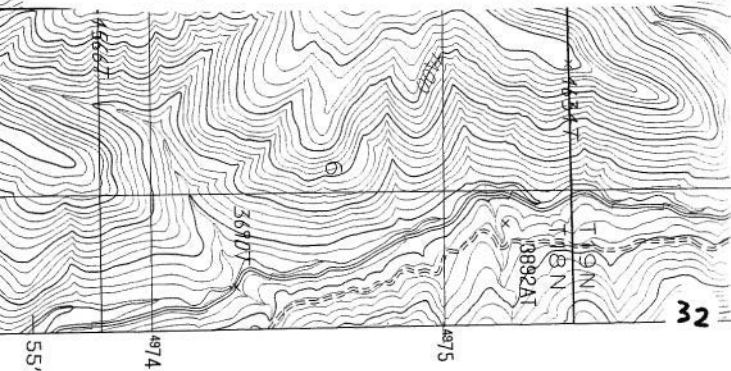
Ultimately, this article got me thinking about categories and genres, my own likes and dislikes, and all the identity politics of being queer. As time moved on I began to accept myself and my increasingly more eclectic tastes more and more. It was (and is) very much a coming out process, I think.

To that end, I ultimately \*did\* come out publicly (probably around 2000) as an Aerosmith fan. As ridiculous as it may sound, it felt like a huge step for me personally, and has allowed me to embrace a side



of myself that I didn't realize existed. Nowadays I feel no shame in saying that there's room in my jukebox (or iTunes library) for some of the more pseudo-macho and/or hetero elements of rock and roll like KISS, AC/DC, and even (gasp!) some Guns-N-Roses.

I'm also much more able to embrace my lovers' loves, too, even if they're not my own. Through my lovers I've been introduced to musicians like Palace Brothers, Cat Power, The Flying Lizards, NegativLand, and back to Bruce Springsteen again. Through my heart connections with these amazing folks, and through the brilliant writing of Lester Bangs about The Boss (whom I previously disregarded), I think that my own closet doors have not just been cracked open but completely blown off, allowing sunlight and musical freedom to shine out illuminating my world and rose-tinting my queer lenses.



## Contributors

*Christine Bylund* is a 25 year old rural Swedish crip-femme now leading and urban existence. She directs, writes and performs on all things femme and crip and blogs (ir)regularly at <http://makingflesh.blogspot.com>.

*Maggie Cee* is the founder and artistic director of The Femme Show, a ground-breaking touring variety show about queer femme identity. Maggie's work can also be found under several names in various queer anthologies. 4th of July, Asbury Park is one of her favorite songs, and her Greasy Lake screen name is MikesDaughter. [www.thefemmeshow.com](http://www.thefemmeshow.com)

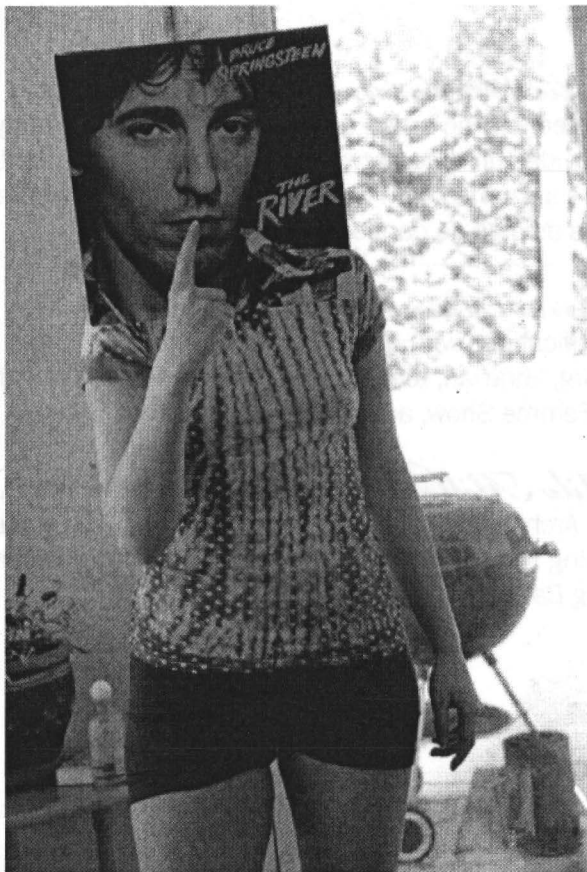
*Emily Drabinski* ([emily.drabinski@gmail.com](mailto:emily.drabinski@gmail.com)) is a librarian who has been writing about her lunch on the internet since 2008.

*Kate Drabinski* reads, writes, teaches, and rides her bicycle around. Find her at [whatisawridingmybikearoundtoday.wordpress.com](http://whatisawridingmybikearoundtoday.wordpress.com).

*Leslie Freeman* is a white, working class, disabled femme artist, activist, and mama. Currently, sie divides hir time between homes in rural Vermont, where sie writes, and Coney Island, New York, where sie works as a go-go dancer.

*Alana Kumbier* shares affinities and identifications with her fellow writers: femme, crip-cyborg, librarian, teacher, zine-maker, performer with the Femme Show, and amateur letterpress printer.

*Milo Miller* is the co-founder of QZAP, the Queer Zine Archive Project (<http://www.qzap.org>). Ze's been making zines since the early 1990's, the most recent being *Bananarchy Now!*



*Bruce Springsteen Sleeve Facing by Mike Bouchard.*  
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